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C O N F I D E N T I A L VATICAN 000461

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/WE LEVIN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 3/29/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VT](#)

SUBJECT: WEAKENED POPE MISSES EASTER SERVICES

CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, POL, Vatican, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

11. (C) For the first time since his 1978 election to the papacy, Pope John Paul II was unable to participate in the Vatican's Holy Week and Easter celebrations, suggesting that his condition continues to deteriorate following his February surgery. Despite a series of indications that the Pope had intended to participate in the Easter Sunday ceremony and potentially in the Good Friday stations of the cross ceremony at the Colosseum, his involvement was limited to a few cameo appearances from the window of his quarters and an appearance via video-link showing only his back. Rumors about the Pope's health, including a brief media burst reporting that he was dead, continue to swirl around Rome. Although the actual situation is not so dire, the Easter services left little doubt that the Pope has not convalesced well, and that complications from his surgery are leaving him weaker and at greater risk of more serious problems. Foreign Minister Lajolo told the Charge March 29 that the Pope's difficulties stem primarily from his inability to eat regularly, which has left him physically weaker and less able to cope with his other health limitations. Given this situation, the Pope will likely never be able to resume the level of activity that he had enjoyed before his 2005 hospitalizations, and it is likely that he will suffer continuing health crises in the weeks and months ahead. End Summary.

Pope Sits Out Easter

12. (SBU) For the first time since his 1978 election to the papacy, Pope John Paul II was unable to participate in the Vatican's Holy Week and Easter celebrations, his involvement limited to a few cameo appearances from the window of his quarters and an appearance via video-link. In the lead-up to Easter, the Vatican reported that the Pope was conserving his energy in the hopes of imparting at least a portion of the traditional Urbi et Orbi (to the city and to the world) message on Easter Sunday. Some Vatican reports suggested he might be on track to do so, noting his continued throat and speaking exercises to regain his voice following his February 24 tracheotomy. On March 20 (Palm Sunday) and March 23, the Pope appeared at his window to bless and wave to the crowd in St. Peter's Square below. On both occasions he looked extremely weak and failed to speak (he has not spoken in public since March 13, a few hours before being released from Rome's Gemelli hospital). Still, his mere appearance at the window temporarily put to rest reports of an even more serious condition.

13. (SBU) Although the Vatican had announced the roster of papal stand-ins for Holy Week services some time ago, officials were clearly hoping the Pope would take part in some way. They installed a video-link in his quarters, and arranged for him to deliver at least part of the Urbi et Orbi message from his window. On March 25 (Good Friday), the Vatican made use of the video option, cutting several times to a shot of the Pope in his chapel during the traditional "Way of the Cross" observances in the Colosseum. Television viewers at home and those watching a video screen on site saw only John Paul's back and part of his left side - never his face -- as he sat in silent contemplation. Commentators remarked on the odd choice of camera angle, some questioning if the Vatican had been concealing medical equipment assisting the Pope. Vatican officials insisted that the angle was in keeping with the idea that the Pope was not at the center of the event; he was an observer like the rest of the congregation. Presiding Cardinal Camillo Ruini, the Pope's vicar for Rome, read a statement from the Pope in which he said he was "close to all those who are being tried with suffering." The Pope's message said he was offering his "sufferings so that God's plan [would] be realized and his word spread among peoples."

14. (U) As Easter Sunday mass concluded before a larger-than-usual throng in St. Peter's Square with television coverage from some 80 countries, the crowd turned en masse expectantly towards the papal apartments as the curtains were pulled aside in the Pope's room. Cheers rose as the Pope

appeared in the window, and with paper in hand and a microphone ready, it seemed as if he would speak. But the Pontiff tried unsuccessfully several times to make himself heard, managing only a coughing noise. After a few moments, he waved and gestured to the crowd, blessing onlookers several times with his

right hand. There were cheers from below, but also palpable sadness among many pilgrims who had come to Rome to see what they believed would be their last glimpse of the Pope. He remained at his open window for some fifteen minutes before he withdrew.

Rumors of the Pope's Demise Unfounded

15. (C) The Pope's condition remains a major focus of Italian and international media. The week before Easter, rumors had swirled in Rome that the Pope had taken a turn for the worse. Some claimed he had been rushed back to the hospital, and networks were calling the Embassy seeking to verify reports that the Pope had, in fact, passed away. Monsignor Gabriele Caccia, the Vatican's third-ranking official in the Secretariat of State's First Section (the equivalent of the Prime Minister's cabinet), told the Charge on one such occasion that the Pope was safe and sound in bed, and noted that Vatican officials had been getting occasional flurries of such calls in recent months. Although these report proved unfounded, it is clear that the Pope's health remains unstable: on March 25 a contact in the Swiss Guard who had been on duty outside the papal apartments the night before told Embassy staff that the Pontiff had been up all night with his doctors.

Comment

16. (C) In the wake of the Easter services, the mood around the Vatican was one of sadness and resignation. With the Pope unable to rally for even a brief appearance on the most important day in the Christian calendar, it was undeniable that he had reached a new low in his state of health. American Archbishop John Foley, a frequent television commentator and President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, told us the day's events had brought him to tears. The DCM at the Polish Embassy told us there was common acknowledgement in Polish circles close to the Pope that the situation was now "very serious." He noted that the Polish journalists with whom he had spoken after Sunday's mass seemed to have abandoned their usual frenzied search for fodder for sensationalistic stories on the Pope's health. Rather, they seemed "quiet, calm," and resigned to this further Papal decline.

17. (C) Post sees little cause for optimism on the Pope's health. All senior officials have abandoned their traditional optimism regarding the Pope's status, and now shake their heads and acknowledge that the Pope is suffering. Foreign Minister Lajolo's explanation to the Charge that the Pope is experiencing difficulties eating following his tracheotomy, which in turn leaves him weaker and more vulnerable, seems a credible explanation for the decline in the Pope's physical appearance in recent weeks. While he may be able to attain a temporary level of stability, he will almost certainly never resume the level of activity that he had enjoyed before his 2005 hospitalizations, and the Holy See will have to adjust increasingly to a "virtual Pope" seen only via video. The Pope has of course surprised many with his resilience, but there are few signs of optimism that His Holiness can overcome his mounting physical limitations.

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